

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Lying down on the job

As David Robinson gets in a compromising position in a strange woman's bedroom, he wonders what else he'll have to do to get his hands on her meat and two veg

"Is he going upstairs with me now or after we've eaten?" she asks.

I am somewhat taken aback by the question but try to hide my surprise. The guy who's invited me round for dinner decides that now will be better, which is why I am lying flat on my back in the bedroom with my arm up the back of her dressing table.

Before you get completely the wrong idea, perhaps I should explain. I'm back in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, again. My host is Rod, a Yorkshireman who's worked there for a number of years. In all the times I've visited this customer site we've exchanged pleasantries in passing but we've hardly been best buddies, despite both hailing from the same county. He's from the bit where, supposedly, folks are hard as granite, greet each other with a gruff 'Eyup' and put ferrets down their trousers for fun. I'm from the rather more genteel (wimpy?) bit near the coast.

Completely out of the blue, Rod invited me round for dinner. He told me his wife, Roz, likes to meet people from back home. He is full of a previously unknown bonhomie, so what can I do but accept? After all, it's nicer eating in good company than alone in yet another restaurant. And, like a true Yorkshireman, the cost aspect hasn't escaped me either.

SKYPE'S THE LIMIT

Somewhat apprehensively I follow Roz upstairs, where she looks at me plaintively and asks if I can help her to sort out her computer. Everything suddenly becomes clear: I am expected to sing for my supper. I get the impression that she thinks I know all about "the problem", but telling me about it appears to have slipped Rod's mind.

Rather than drop him in it, I ask some discreet questions as if I know the score. Apparently she's heard about Skype and wants to use it to make free phone calls back home to where her daughter and the much-adored grandchildren live with the whippets and ferrets. Her son-in-law has sent Roz a VoIP phone and a CD, and she's tried for hours to get it to work but without success.



I plug the phone into the USB port. The computer doesn't respond with the usual 'Found new hardware' message, and it definitely isn't already among the installed devices. Trying a manual install doesn't get me very far, either. The CD is a home copy, not an official one, and examining the contents isn't very enlightening. I don't know what sort of files are on there, but they don't look much like USB device drivers to me. So the VoIP phone looks like a non-starter.

Then there's the problem of installing Skype itself. The whole neighbourhood is wired for cable with Comcas, which means they could subscribe to the US equivalent of broadband. But Rod is even more of a Yorkshireman than I am, and the \$10 per month (that's a fiver) difference between high-speed cable and the cheaper dial-up service is too much for him. It will take forever to download the Skype software using a modem and I wonder if it will even work over the limited bandwidth.

CABLE TIES

I go to my nuclear-yellow Ford F250 pickup to get my notebook. Rod is smirking on the sofa, watching English football and enjoying his third beer as I haul my bag upstairs. Blow me, he's got cable but we can't use it for the PC!

Fortunately, I have a copy of a recent version of the Skype install files in my downloads folder, so I copy them to Roz's computer using a pen drive. Does she have a microphone? No. I delve into the bag and retrieve a cheap headset and mic. I've found these work just as well, if not better, than a VoIP phone for a fraction of the cost.

The next problem is that there's nowhere to plug in the earphone bit, as the sound card output is taken up by some old speakers that she says don't work. Which is why I'm supine with my arm up the back of the dressing table disentangling the leads so we can remove the speakers and plug in the headset.

I install Skype and tweak the settings to use the PC's standard sound devices. Then we connect to the net via the modem. Who can we call to test the thing? I show Roz how to search for Skype users and we try to call her daughter in Yorkshire, but Skype informs us that she's not online.

Skype has a sort of call-back test service, so we try that with mixed results. You can record a message yourself to play back and/or listen to a standard pre-recorded message. My "1, 2, 3, Mary had a little lamb" message comes back garbled on the first try, fine the next time and then garbled again. I sound like a Dalek stuck in a skip.

I reckon it's the available bandwidth that's varying enough to affect the voice quality, but only sometimes.

The pre-recorded voice test fares little better. Sometimes a sultry-voiced lady, sometimes a female Dalek. I'd really like to try talking to a real person, but who? Knowing that, by now, it's 2am in England, I decide to be cheeky. I Skype search for David Robinsons in America and pick one at random who's online. It starts to ring. Nothing. I try five more and still can't get anyone to answer. Blast.

WHERE'S THE BEEF?

By now I'm hungry and have had enough. To save time I call home.

"Do you know what time it is?" says Mrs R, not best pleased at being hauled out of bed. I apologise – OK, grovel – but explain about the need to test the Skype connection, which works fine: she doesn't sound at all like a Dalek, even if she does want to exterminate me. We chat for a while but, judiciously, I omit to tell her I'm upstairs with Roz in the bedroom.

Anyway, job seemingly done, it's time to eat. I have to say that it was worth the wait. Roz made roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. Now, a lot of people just can't get Yorkshire puddings right. Mrs R can; hers are consistently very good. But Roz's are in a league of their own. If they were any lighter you'd need to put the spuds on top to stop them floating away. So my efforts were not unrewarded.

When I finally got home, there was an email from Roz saying that her daughter had added a webcam to the system in England and she could now see the beloved grandchildren as well as talk to them. I can see what will happen on my next trip. I just hope that when they buy the webcam for their end it comes from a proper outlet with the correct driver disc, not something from a car boot sale. **CS**

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